

## Trade Unions and Democratisation in Africa

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### Introduction

In the last decade a considerable number of studies have been published on the process of democratisation in Africa<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, some conspicuous lacunae still exist in the growing body of literature. In a recent overview, Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot mention that the role of certain civil society organisations in the democratic transition process, in particular trade unions, has been almost completely ignored<sup>2</sup>.

This apparent neglect is not altogether surprising. Several Africanists take an extremely pessimistic view of the role of trade unions in the African post-colonial state. They look upon trade unions as weak organisations with close ties to ruling authoritarian regimes and with vested interests in the status quo. Some attempt to justify their position by emphasising that trade unions are usually not only small, organising only a tiny minority of the working population in the predominantly agrarian societies in Africa, but also subordinated to state control in the aftermath of independence for the sake of «national development». Others claim that trade union members form a privileged minority in African societies, a so-called «labour aristocracy», enjoying higher incomes and living standards than the rural majority, and that trade unions pursue narrow self-interests at the expense of the urban and rural poor, taking advantage of better organisation, and being in collusion with the ruling elite<sup>3</sup>. Little wonder that these authors have low

1. One recent comparative study is Bratton, M., and Van de Walle, N., 1997.

2. Buijtenhuijs, R., and Thiriot, C., 1995, pp. 63-64.

3. See, for instance, Arrighi, G., and Saul, J.S., 1973; Lipton, M., 1977; Bates, R., 1981. It is interesting to observe that both the World Bank and some African leaders, like Rawlings in Ghana, have often used similar arguments to legitimise the anti-labour measures in Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and to suppress any trade union opposition. See Kraus, J., 1991; Bangura, Y., and Beckman, B., 1993; Adesina, J., 1994; Gibbon, P., 1995. It was only in 1995 that the World Bank openly acknowledged the important role of trade unionism in the stabilisation of the democratic process and the functioning of the labour markets. See World Bank, 1995.

expectations of the role of trade unions in the process of political change. Although Buijtenhuijs has presented a somewhat more nuanced view on trade unions in Africa, he, too, appears to have little faith in the political potential of organised labour, focusing instead on the study of peasant rebellions<sup>4</sup>.

These views have been contested by other Africanists, particularly those who have carried out intensive research on trade unions in Africa<sup>5</sup>. They are ready to admit that trade unions in Africa show a number of weaknesses, but they equally stress that trade unions are among the few organisations that have been able to survive the onslaught on civil society by authoritarian post-colonial regimes. They argue that African governments have found it hard to control trade unions. Trade unions, in fact, were able to preserve at least some autonomy, varying on a continuum from low (in former African socialist states, including Guinea, Ghana, Tanzania, and some Francophone countries like Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and Togo), to medium (Mali, Senegal and Nigeria), and high (Burkina Faso and Zambia). Even in countries where post-colonial governments did achieve a large measure of control at the national level by co-opting trade union leaders into the regime, they often failed to control unions at regional and local levels<sup>6</sup>. Paradoxically, certain state corporatist strategies, like the centralisation of the trade union movement, the allocation of substantial funds, the introduction of the check-off system<sup>7</sup>, and assistance in trade union education tended instead to strengthen the organisational capacity of the unions, which, in turn, was of great significance to future union struggles for autonomy<sup>8</sup>. Some of these authors have also severely criticised the «labour aristocracy» thesis on empirical and theoretical grounds<sup>9</sup>. Even if one could demonstrate the general applicability of a substantial income gap between lower skilled workers and the peasantry, which has obviously become more doubtful during the structural adjustment period, the thesis would still be unconvincing. It is simply too crudely materialist to draw an immediate link between objective conditions and political behaviour.

This latter group of authors tend to be more optimistic than the former about the role of trade unions in African post-colonial states. They usually refer to certain specific factors which guarantee trade unions an exceptional position among other civil society organisations. First, trade union members may form only a small proportion of the working population in Africa but they are concentrated in the cities and active in strategically important sectors of the economy. As such, they may exercise considerable political

4. See Buijtenhuijs, R., 1975, and 1991.

5. See, for instance, Sandbrook, R., and Cohen, R., 1975; Agier, M. *et al.*, 1987; Freund, B., 1988.

6. See, for instance, Bates, R., 1971; and Konings, P., 1993.

7. This is a system whereby union dues are automatically deducted from workers' wages and paid to the unions.

8. Hashim, Y., 1994; Akwetey, E.O., 1994.

9. See, for instance, Waterman, P., 1975; Sandbrook, R., 1982; Jamal, V., and Weeks, J., 1993; Adesina, J., 1994.

power, being potentially capable of paralysing the economy and threatening the regime in power. Second, trade unions belong among the oldest civil society organisations with a long history of struggles against oppressive and exploitative regimes. They have often played a leading role in the fight for independence. Although subject to state control in the post-colonial era, they have nevertheless proved capable from time to time of calling general strikes against corrupt, elitist and authoritarian regimes in countries like Senegal (1961), Ghana (1961, 1971), Nigeria (1964, 1971, 1981), Congo-Brazzaville (1963, 1968), Burkina Faso (1961, 1975), Sudan (1958, 1964), Madagascar (1972), and Ethiopia (1974)<sup>10</sup>. On such occasions, it became manifest that trade unions were able to mobilise support beyond their own membership. Small producers and traders in the expanding informal sector, who usually maintain close relations with workers, and students were particularly inclined to support their actions<sup>11</sup>. Third, trade unions often enjoy a higher degree of international solidarity than other civil society organisations. International trade union organisations and the International Labour Office (ILO) in Geneva have frequently requested authoritarian regimes to release trade union leaders from prison and to ensure a minimum of trade union liberties<sup>12</sup>.

Given such factors and the protracted economic and political crisis facing most African countries, these authors expect trade unions to play an important role in current struggles for a democratic transition. They claim that workers hold the authoritarian, and often corrupt, regimes responsible for their predicament in the economic crisis and subsequent Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), leading to a widespread loss of legitimacy in these regimes among the labour force<sup>13</sup>. Confronted with retrenchments, curtailments in pay and suspension of benefits, managerial efforts to intensify supervision and increase labour productivity, soaring consumer prices, and user charges for public services, workers will bring considerable pressures to bear upon the unions to cut their ties with the regime in power and join the struggle for a democratic transition, which, according to them, is more likely to raise prospects for «good governance» and an improvement in their lot.

Recent research, however, presents a more complex picture of the role of unions in the democratic transition than both the pessimistic and optimistic schools of thought tended to offer us. There actually appears to be a large variation in this role<sup>14</sup>. In this article I have selected three-case studies for an in-depth comparative analysis: Zambia, Ghana, and Cameroon. They are not only cases with which the author is familiar, they also reflect variations in the degree of intensity of the unions' role in the democratic process,

10. Sandbrook, R., 1982.

11. See, for instance, Jeffries, R., 1978; Peace, A., 1979; and Freund, B., 1988.

12. Kester, G., and Sidibé, O.O., 1997, p. 33.

13. See, for instance, Gibbon, P. *et al.*, 1992; Bangura, Y., and Beckman, B., 1993; Akwetey, E.O., 1994.

14. See, for instance, Bratton, M., and Van de Walle, N., 1992; Akwetey, E.O., 1994; Kester, G., and Sidibé, O.O., 1997.

varying from high in Zambia, medium in Ghana, and low in Cameroon. I want to demonstrate that these variations depend not only on differences in the unions' organisational strength and previous state-union relations, but also on the unions' willingness to involve themselves directly in the creation of *formal* democracy, in particular in the form of a multi-party system. Our case-studies suggest that unions in Africa, particularly in the English-speaking countries, are more likely to fight for autonomy versus the state and for a larger degree of participation in the national decision-making process than to support or join opposition forces in their struggle for the establishment of a multi-party system. Two factors may explain this situation. First, the colonial rulers, and particularly the English ones, advised the unions to stay away from direct involvement in politics, especially in the form of seeking any alliances with political movements and parties, as ultimately being harmful to the unions' representation of workers' interests. Although the unions have not always adhered to this advice, the colonial model of autonomous trade unionism has remained an important reference ever since<sup>15</sup>. Second, civil society organisations' lack of autonomy and participation in the national decision-making process were key features of the post-colonial authoritarian state, preventing the unions from effectively representing workers' interests. Trade union leaders therefore regard the obtainment of trade union autonomy and a larger degree of participation in the national decision-making process as essential preconditions for both the defence of workers' interests and the development of a *democratic culture* in society<sup>16</sup>.

Trade unions' simultaneous requests for autonomy and participation clearly show that trade unions do not strive for complete disengagement from the state, as some civil society theorists like Azarya<sup>17</sup>, would have us believe. Trade unions instead aspire for a larger say in government policies from an autonomous position. Trade union leaders are confident that they will be in a better position to defend workers' interests if they participate in regular bilateral and tripartite committees and commissions dealing with economic and wage matters. They are particularly bitter about the fact that they have never been consulted in the planning and implementation of SAPS in spite of their nefarious effects on workers' living and working conditions.

### The Zambian case

The Zambian trade union movement is among the strongest and most militant in Sub-Saharan Africa. Zambia used to have an exceptionally high proportion of its working population in the labour force (between 25-30 %),

15. See Konings, P., 1993.

16. See Akwetey, E.O., 1994.

17. Azarya, V., 1988.

most of whom were concentrated in its strategic industry – copper mining. This, of course, provided the trade union movement with considerable leverage *vis-à-vis* the state.

Similar to other trade unions in former British colonies in Africa, the Zambian trade union movement was founded on pluralist principle enjoying a large measure of autonomy versus the colonial state. However when the struggle for national independence gathered momentum, a group of politically-oriented trade unionists vowed to support the United National Independence Party (UNIP) as the most progressive party of the time. Capitalising on the close relationship between the party and the trade union movement, UNIP tried, after independence, to transform the trade union movement from units emphasising the interests of their members in production units, for the sake of rapid national development. Through an act of parliament, one single trade union centre, the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), was created, which was intended by the UNIP government to serve as an agent of control and a channel of communication for UNIP policies to the workers. The results of this policy were dismal. The ZCTU proved incapable of establishing control over the workers, which manifested itself in a growing number of strikes despite continued calls for industrial peace from the ZCTU. In addition, the largest and best-organised unions, particularly those of the mine workers and the railway workers, consistently opposed attempts at subordination as they had opposed party control during the struggle for independence<sup>18</sup>.

Aware that its policies had largely failed, the UNIP government enacted new Industrial Relations Act in 1971. While this act undoubtedly increased the incorporation of the union movement into the state apparatus, ironically, also strengthened the organisational capacity of the trade union movement in a number of ways. It stipulated that there would be only one union per industry, and that each union had to be affiliated to the ZCTU. Moreover, the act provided for the introduction of the check-off system. The new act specifically required all unions to spend part of their funds on workers' education. As a result of this act, the trade union movement showed a high degree of centralisation and unity, was well-financed, and devoted a great deal of attention to workers' education<sup>19</sup>.

While the strengthening of the union movement was legislated by the government to increase the unions' controlling function, from 1973 onwards the ZCTU instead used its newly acquired strength to regain trade union autonomy and to oppose those government policies seen as harmful to the workers. From a position of little popular acclaim, the ZCTU developed into the unofficial national opposition, particularly in the 1980s.

The first indication of the ZCTU's future oppositional role occurred in the wake of the government's declaration of «One-Party Participatory Democracy» in 1973 and its subsequent attempt to transform the trade union

18. See, for instance, Bates, R., 1971 ; and Rakner, L., 1992.

19. See, for instance, Bratton, M., 1994 ; Rakner, L., 1992 ; and Akwetey, E.O., 1994.

movement into a wing of the party. This attempt was resented within the trade union movement and developed into a struggle for control of leadership positions within the ZCTU. With the election of new, young leaders such as Newstead Zimba as Secretary-General and Frederick Chiluba as President in 1974, organised labour was slowly but definitely moving towards a type of trade union leadership that considered trade union autonomy as the best guarantee for the representation and defence of workers' interests, while rejecting any leader who accepted patronage posts offered by the UNIP. The new leadership clashed with the government in November 1974 when the government announced substantial consumer price increases and proposed removing subsidies on bread and cooking oil. The ZCTU organised street demonstrations in Lusaka and the Copperbelt, forcing the government to back down.

Another fierce confrontation between the state and organised labour occurred in the early 1980s when the trade unions opposed the enactment of the Local Administration Act which sought to bring local administration in line with the dictates of the one-party system<sup>20</sup>. The act tried to restrict the election of local government councillors to party members only, thus weakening the voting rights of Zambian citizens. It also proposed merging the administration of urban centres and mine townships, thereby diluting the welfare services available to mine workers. The government responded to opposition by the ZCTU and the mine workers' union to both measures by suspending 17 labour leaders from the UNIP, which meant that they ceased to hold union office. Four senior labour leaders, including Chiluba, were detained for several weeks on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government. Miners reacted with a series of protest strikes during 1981. The strikes only ended when the government allowed the labour leaders to continue in their union positions, and agreed to remove the clauses that would have integrated mine townships into the new district councils.

Lastly, the worsening economic crisis leading to a serious deterioration in workers' living standards compelled the unions to take the government to task on questions of governance, public accountability and economic policy. The government's signing of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1983 seems to have been taken by the unions as a declaration of war. Although the ZCTU was probably not directly involved in the 1986 and 1990 food riots, it took advantage of the popular uprising by blaming the economic distress on the UNIP's mismanagement and corruption and the authoritarian structures of the single-party state, resulting in an increasing loss of legitimacy of the Kaunda government.

There were, however, three major reasons why the trade union movement in Zambia became more directly involved in the struggle for the introduction of formal democracy and pluralism at the end of the 1980s than most other trade unions in Africa. First, there was the persistent refusal of the Kaunda government to give in to repeated union demands to create some

20 See, for instance, Bratton, M., 1994 ; Simutanyi, N.R., 1992 ; and Mihyo, P., 1995.

'democratic' opening in the regime by allowing the unions to participate in economic decision-making. Second, there was the determined effort of the Kaunda government to cripple the union movement. The 1985 Statutory Instrument no. 6 was issued by the government banning strikes and removing the check-off system (the latter was intended to starve the unions of the funds needed to mobilise workers against the structural adjustment policies). The 1990 Industrial Relations Act repealed the obligation for a trade union to be affiliated to the ZCTU. This act was obviously intended to undermine the organisational cohesion of the trade union movement. Third, there was the growing feeling that Chiluba in the context of deep public alienation was the only national leader capable of challenging Kaunda. Building on this reputation, Chiluba embraced the multi-party cause. At a labour rally in 1989, in reference to Eastern Europe he asked : «If the owners of socialism have withdrawn from the one-party system, who are the Africans to continue with it<sup>21</sup>.»

Rakner, however, rightly points out that the ZCTU leaders viewed the unions' political role merely as a temporary arrangement<sup>22</sup>. They tended to perceive the replacement of the single-party system by a multi-party system as the best guarantee of the preservation of union autonomy, the participation of the unions in the decision-making process, and «good governance». After the introduction of a multi-party system, the trade union movement was to return to its «traditional» role of defending workers interests.

The trade union movement in Zambia never aimed to become an alternative party. It worked instead in close co-operation with the other oppositional forces in society, becoming instrumental in forming the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in 1990. The role of the trade union movement in the political mobilisation process must be considered significant as the ZCTU was the only organisation in Zambia, apart from the governing party, that possessed organisational resources enabling it to reach large sections of the population.

Following the victory of the MMD in the 1991 elections, the unions had high expectations of the new government which included six former ZCTU ministers. Their initial optimism, however, has rapidly given way to disillusionment. The Chiluba government has implemented SAP measures even more rigorously than the former Kaunda government. It has labelled wage demands by unions as sectional, selfish and disruptive to the economic programme. Strikes by workers are seen as irresponsible as they frighten away foreign investment. Mass retrenchment of workers in the public sector has markedly weakened the trade union movement and union leaders have increasingly felt excluded from MMD policy-making. The MMD appears to be as eager as the UNIP to keep the labour movement under government control. Like its predecessor, the Chiluba regime has tried to encourage close relations between the ruling party and the ZCTU. Suspicion that the

21. Quoted in Bratton, M., 1994, p. 116.

22. Rakner, L., 1992, p. 134.

government had manipulated the leadership contest of the ZCTU actually led the mine workers' union and four other unions to secede from the ZCTU, an action which was declared illegal by the Chiluba government as being in clear contravention of the 1990 Industrial Relations Act. And, above all, the Chiluba regime is increasingly being exposed as incompetent, corrupt and factional. As the regime loses legitimacy, it cannot be ruled out that the unions may again be in the forefront of democratic change in Zambia<sup>23</sup>.

### The Ghanaian case

The Ghanaian trade union movement, like its Zambian counterpart, has always been a potentially strong social force. Ghana used to have a somewhat lower proportion of its working population in the labour force than Zambia (approximately 24 %). Following independence in 1957, the Nkrumah government and the leadership of the Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) decided to strengthen and centralise the organisational structure of the trade union movement. Both parties agreed that a strong and highly centralised trade union movement would make a significant contribution to both the construction of a socialist state and the defence of workers' interests. The 1958 Industrial Relations Act transformed the colonial trade union model of a large number of small and weak local unions into a «new» model with a limited number of strong national unions, introduced the check-off system, and allowed the GTUC considerable power<sup>24</sup>. The trade union movement in Ghana, however, appears to have been more exposed to government control, both under civilian and military regimes, than the trade union movement in Zambia. Significantly, these controlling efforts were not always successful, even at the highest level of the trade union movement. Out of frustration, the Busia civilian government (1969-1972) abolished the GTUC in 1971 feeling that this was the only way of controlling the trade union movement.

When Rawlings took over power from the third civilian government in Ghana on 31 December 1981, the labour movement was in a state of disarray. The leadership of the GTUC was severely compromised in the eyes of many of its members. In recognition of a series of measures favourable to the labour movement, including the restoration of the GTUC in 1972, the GTUC leadership had refused to support the protest actions of other civil society organisations against the corrupt and authoritarian Supreme Military Council (SMC). Neither had the GTUC leadership offered any effective leadership in the labour disputes that destroyed the Third Republic<sup>25</sup>.

23. See Simutanyi, N.R., 1996.

24. See, for instance, Damachi, U., 1974 ; Konings, P., 1977 ; and Jeffries, R., 1978.

25. See, for instance, Nugent, P., 1995 ; and Chazan, N., 1983.

Shortly after the 1981 coup, a group of militant trade unionists in the Accra-Tema area, organised in the so-called Association of Local Unions (ALU), launched a putsch of its own, taking over power from the compromised GTUC leadership – no doubt, with the silent support of the ruling Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC). The PNDC also intervened directly in the system of industrial relations by installing Workers Defence Committees (WDCs) in every workplace without clarifying their relationship with the existing union structure<sup>26</sup>. Apparently, the WDCs were initially conceived as instruments to control of the labour movement<sup>27</sup>.

The PNDC implementation of a SAP in 1983 came as a shock to the workers who had been the main supporters of Rawlings's «revolution». This led to a rapid loss of PNDC legitimacy among the workers. In particular, the manner in which the April 1983 budget, announcing severe cuts in public subsidies and price rises, had been presented seemed to demonstrate that the PNDC was taking the labour movement for granted. The ALU leadership of the GTUC, which remained strongly committed to the ideals of the revolution, had not been consulted, but it nevertheless felt obliged to «sell» the austere SAP measures to its members. Little wonder that it was soon accused of betraying workers' interests and of being too subservient to the Rawlings regime<sup>28</sup>. During the GTUC elections in December of the same year, it was voted out of office and replaced by the «old guard» led by A.K. Yankey. These «old guard» leaders were not concerned with safeguarding the ideals of the revolution since they had been among the principal casualties in 1982. They were more concerned with preserving trade union autonomy versus the state and upholding what they considered the essential task of unions : the defence of workers' interests, even if it meant jeopardising the good relationship that had been established.

The new GTUC leadership immediately started criticising the government for its lack of consultation and negotiation with the unions in respect of decisions affecting the workers. It blamed the government for «the unbearable conditions of the working people's lives as a result of the imposed SAP measures», and it demanded the restoration of collective bargaining procedures and union participation in the economic decision-making process. In the highly repressive atmosphere of 1984-1987, the GTUC felt constrained to resort to the militant mobilisation of workers to back its demands. Its new Secretary-General, Mr A.K. Yankey, therefore, sought to operate carefully, doubting the ability of the GTUC to survive a war of attrition. Consequently, he tried to make known the GTUC position by the presentation of memoranda to the government, and press communications to the general public. This form of trade union protest appeared to have little impact on the government which persisted in its unilateral style of decision-making, disregarding the GTUC in the process.

26. See, for instance, Konings, P., 1986 ; and Herbst, J., 1991.

27. Hansen, E., 1987, p. 179.

28. Yeebo, Z., 1991.

The apparent futility of these protests led the GTUC to consider other methods of defending workers' interests. It began to strengthen the organisational capacity of the unions and to mobilise the rank and file for collective action. It reactivated the District Councils of Labour which functioned as the link between local unions and the national leadership. These District Councils succeeded to a large extent in regaining the support of union members by stressing the new GTUC leadership's critical stance on the SAP. The GTUC also mobilised the wider support of organised labour, trying to create a common platform in defence of workers' interests. Hitherto, Ghana's three profession-based public sector associations – the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), the Ghana Registered Nurses' Association (GRNA), and the Civil Servants' Association of Ghana (CSAG) – had been dealing with the government separately. A series of high-level meetings led to the formation of the Consultative National Forum of Ghana Labour in 1986. It was established to enable workers' organisations in the country «to speak with one voice» and to act jointly when dealing with the PNDC<sup>29</sup>.

In April 1986, the GTUC felt sufficiently strengthened to confront the government in a more militant way when the latter unilaterally cancelled leave allowances and end-of-service benefits for public sector workers. The GTUC leadership told the government that lack of communication between the regime and the unions left it with no other choice but to call a general strike. It exhorted workers to wave red flags and wear red cotton bands (the customary sign of mourning). The outrage expressed by ordinary workers suggested that the strike enjoyed the overwhelming support of its members. The PNDC did not resort to force, but swiftly reinstated the allowances and end-of-service benefits. In addition, it soon reactivated tripartite institutions and bilateral forms of consultation. By inviting the GTUC to serve on old and new fora, the government met GTUC demands for channels of consultation and participation.

That the PNDC regime backed down and responded positively to the GTUC's request to participate in the national decision-making process on the basis of organisational autonomy was mainly due to the following factors. First, unlike the Kaunda government, the PNDC was by now prepared to create a «democratic» opening in the regime. It had come to realise that coercion was not an effective instrument of governance, particularly at a time when most urban forces had become increasingly hostile to the regime<sup>30</sup>. Having become aware of the increased organisational strength of the GTUC, the PNDC found it politically astute to give the unions access to the decision-making process rather than to forcibly confront it, which, moreover, might permanently endanger the adjustment programme. Second, tripartite meetings were more institutionalised in Ghana than in Zambia, where they used to be *ad hoc*, called irregularly, and mostly convened at the

29. Akwetey, E.O., 1994, pp. 88-89.

30. See, for instance, Rothchild, D., 1991 ; Nugent, P., 1995 ; and Konings, P., 1999.

pleasure of the president. The reactivation of the tripartite institutions by the PNDC removed a major source of the legitimisation crisis. Subsequently attention has shifted to the substance of the bargain struck by trade union leaders in the tripartite fora.

Having obtained from the authoritarian regime what it regarded as two of the major objectives of trade unionism in the defence of workers' interests – a larger degree of autonomy and institutional participation – the GTUC has been less inclined than the ZCTU to engage itself directly in the struggle for formal democracy. By maintaining the «traditional» economic role of trade unionism, it has been able to extract some concessions from the PNDC for its members and has avoided further confrontation and repression by the regime.

During the period 1986-1992, the GTUC seldom made political demands, but when it did, they were usually carefully presented in memoranda and press communications. In 1986, for example, the GTUC appealed to the PNDC to install a People's Assembly composed of representatives of all identifiable civil society groups and organisations, which would allow people to make their views heard and also help the government to take decisions which would be generally acceptable. This idea appeared to be reflected in the PNDC establishment of District Assemblies in 1988<sup>31</sup>. A few years later, the GTUC called for the convening of a democratic «National Constituent Assembly» to formulate a constitution which would then be submitted to the people for approval, as well as for the introduction of a larger measure of political liberalisation. Although these demands coincided with those of the Movement for Freedom and Justice (MFJ), an umbrella organisation of the opposition created in 1990, the GTUC refused to join this organisation and support its struggle for the introduction of multi-partyism in Ghana. And, even more significantly, around the time that the campaign for multi-party elections began, in the autumn of 1992, the GTUC constitution was amended to prohibit the organisation from entering into alliance with, or formally supporting, any political party for the purposes of winning elections. This amendment appears to have been motivated by (i) the GTUC's memory of the harmful effects on the defence of workers' interests of previous alliances with political parties (the Convention People's Party (CPP), 1958-1966 ; and the Social Democratic Front (SDF), 1979-1981), and (ii) its lack of confidence in the alternative constituted by the opposition coalition to Rawlings<sup>32</sup>. The GTUC, therefore, had come to the conclusion that it would be in a better position to defend workers' interests if it preserved its autonomy towards the political parties.

Following the victory of Rawlings's National Democratic Congress (NDC) in the 1992 parliamentary and presidential elections, the GTUC continued to fight for a larger say in government economic and wage policies. Consultations and negotiations in the bilateral and tripartite fora did not automatically lead to a significant improvement in workers' living and

31. See, for instance, Ayee, J.R.A., 1994 ; and Oquaye, M., 1995.

32. See Akwetey, E.O., 1994 ; and Nugent, P., 1995.



working conditions or to any essential changes in government economic policies. The government sometimes even refused to implement the decisions arrived at in the bilateral and tripartite fora. Under strong pressure from the rank and file, the GTUC leadership threatened to call a general strike on these issues in January 1995. Subsequently, the government allowed the tripartite fora to negotiate a new national minimum wage, and promised to implement the decisions of the tripartite meetings<sup>33</sup>. The GTUC has also made proposals for a revision of the SAP, and, in 1995, it requested the government install a national forum about the state of the Ghanaian economy, made up of the tripartite partners and important civil society organisations. The GTUC has also accused the NDC government of continued interference in trade unionism and industrial relations. In 1993, for instance, it lodged a complaint with the ILO in Geneva about the NDC government's interference in the system of collective bargaining.

### The Cameroonian case

Although figures on labour participation are notoriously unreliable, Cameroon appears to have had a smaller proportion of the working population in its labour force than Zambia and Ghana (approximately 17 %). Trade unionism emerged in Cameroon in the mid 1940s. While Francophone Cameroon had several trade union centres which were closely affiliated with the metropolitan trade union centres for a long time, there was only one trade union centre in Anglophone Cameroon, namely the West Cameroon Trade Union Congress. Colonial trade unionism in both Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon was characterised by a high degree of militancy. Unlike their Francophone counterparts, Anglophone trade union leaders appear to have disapproved of forming close alliances with the nationalist movement and parties, having largely accepted the British-imposed model of autonomous and economistic trade unionism<sup>34</sup>.

Following independence and reunification in 1961, however, the Ahidjo regime gradually succeeded in merging all the existing trade union centres into a single body, the National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW), and in subordinating it to the state for the sake of national reconstruction. As I have shown elsewhere<sup>35</sup>, Ahidjo's attempts to establish 'total' control over civil society were never fully successful. Although the NUCW leadership was effectively co-opted into the «hegemonic alliance<sup>36</sup>», the central labour organisation failed to fully control regional and local trade unionism. The

33. Adu-Amankwah, K., and Tutu, K., 1997, pp. 265-266.

34. See, for instance, Joseph, R.A., 1977 ; Bayart, J.-F., 1979 ; and Konings, P., 1993.

35. See Konings, P., 1993, and 1998.

36. Bayart, J.-F., 1979.

close relationship between the state and trade unions continued under Ahidjo's successor, Paul Biya. At the 1985 Bamenda Congress, Biya changed the name of the single party from the Cameroon National Union (CNU) to the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and commended the central labour organisation for its constructive role in society. The National Union of Cameroon Workers (NUCW), in turn, immediately changed its name to the Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC), and its then president, Mr J.-E. Abondo «thanked President Paul Biya a thousand times for all that he had done for the workers<sup>37</sup>». Soon after, Mr Abondo was appointed Minister of Defence, a clear reward for his services to the regime.

While the corrupt and authoritarian Biya regime swiftly lost its legitimacy during the severe economic and political crisis that hit Cameroon from the mid 1980s onwards<sup>38</sup>, the CTUC continued to support the regime. It never attempted to defend the workers' interests after the Biya regime was compelled to impose a SAP in 1988/89. Like the ruling CPDM party, it strongly condemned the increasing calls in civil society for political liberalisation and the introduction of a multi-party system. When the first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), was formed in the Anglophone part of the country in 1990, the then CTUC president, Mr D. Fouda Sima, expressed, like other CPDM loyalists, «his total rejection of what the Head of State has called political models imported from abroad<sup>39</sup>».

Following the introduction of multi-partyism and a large degree of freedom of speech and association in December 1990, one could observe a growing dissatisfaction among the rank and file with the CTUC's performance and its continuing alliance with the ruling CPDM party, which manifested itself in a series of strikes and workers' support of the opposition. Even within the regional and local leadership of the CTUC one could hear severe criticism of the CTUC's position and calls for the unions' autonomy versus the state and political parties<sup>40</sup>. The president of the CTUC in the Fako Division of Anglophone Cameroon, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, who in the meantime had joined the opposition, was to become the most vocal opponent of the corrupt national leadership of the CTUC, openly condemning it for its continued alliance with the ruling party and its complete neglect of the defence of workers' interests during the economic crisis and the SAP<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, he advocated the unions' direct involvement in the struggle for the establishment of formal democracy. In February 1991, he declared :

«The workers expect an independent and strong trade union organisation that would be autonomous in relation to all political parties and state bodies

37. Foundation Friedrich-Ebert, 1994, p. 76.

38. See, for instance, Konings, P., 1996 ; and Takougang, J., and Krieger, M., 1998.

39. *Cameroon Tribune*, 2 May 1990.

40. See, for instance, Mehler, A., 1997.

41. Konings, P., 1995, pp. 71-72.

and institutions... This will relieve the trade unions of the rubber-stamp element in the country's political life. If the trade union does not become more militant and resolute in its demands, then the CTUC won't be of much help to the workers<sup>42</sup>»

Under mounting pressure, the CTUC finally recognised the right of its members to join the political party of their choice on 2 April 1991. The CTUC leadership nevertheless remained closely allied with the ruling party and did not develop its own policy. In these circumstances, some of the unions at the local and regional level tried to cut their ties with the CTUC. The Fako Divisional Unions under the leadership of Vewessee, for example, stopped transferring trade union dues to the CTUC. From 1991 onwards, civil servants started creating strong independent unions, notably in the educational sector. One of these unions, the university lecturers' *Syndicat national des enseignants du supérieur* (SYNES), was created after security forces ransacked university students' quarters in May 1991. The government immediately declared it illegal, stressing that civil servants were prohibited by law from forming unions. Subsequent attempts to intimidate and even physically attack the leadership of the union were motivated by government suspicion that the union was allied to the opposition. After a complaint by SYNES, the International Labour Office (ILO) insisted that civil servants in Cameroon be given the right to unionise. The Biya government, however, still refused to recognise SYNES, but later, in 1994, it decided to legalise a few other, independent unions in the civil service<sup>43</sup>. It is noteworthy that the newly formed civil service unions in the educational sector called general strikes in January-February 1994 because of severe curtailments in, and non-payment of, their salaries.

The new Labour Code of 1992 guaranteed trade union autonomy towards the state, and the CTUC subsequently changed its name to the Confederation of Cameroon Trade Unions (CCTU) to reflect its newly acquired 'autonomous' status. This did not mean the end of government intervention in the unions, however. The government developed several strategies to keep the unions under its control. The 1992 CCTU elections were clearly manipulated by the government buying the support of a number of delegates to make sure that Mr Etame Ndedi, the trade union representative in the CPDM Central Committee, was elected President of the central labour organisation. The popular and outspoken Anglophone trade union leader, Mr C.P.N. Vewessee, who had been the candidate of the autonomous trade unions, was forced to withdraw his candidacy for the presidency prior to the elections. He was accused by CPDM loyalists of striving to split the trade union movement and form a union of his own. The government, however, could not forestall the election of a number of autonomous trade union leaders onto the CCTU executive. One of them, Mr Louis Sombes, became Secretary-General of the union.

42. *Cameroon Post*, 20-27 February 1991, p. 11.

43. Foundation Friedrich-Ebert, 1994, pp. 96-98.

Government intervention in the union became even more overt in late 1993, when Mr Sombes was sacked by the union president, Mr Etame Ndedi, who appeared to be more concerned with implementing government decisions than with defending workers' interests. Sombes was accused of having attempted to call a general strike of civil servants in protest at two severe cuts in their remuneration in 1993, amounting to 70 per cent of their previous salaries. Both the regime and the union president tried to prevent a meeting of the union executive, the majority of whom advocated Sombes's reinstatement. Not even protests from the ILO could dissuade the government from further intervening in the matter. In contravention of ILC convention n° 87, the government openly supported the installation of Mr Jules Mousseni, a CPDM loyalist and Second Vice-Secretary-General of the CCTU, who had been unilaterally nominated by Etame Ndedi as the new Secretary-General of the union. This led the ILO to rebuff Etame Ndedi and the government at its June 1994 Annual Convention in Geneva by refusing to accredit Mousseni. Given the stalemate Sombes's dismissal had caused in the union and the Geneva debacle, the First Vice-President of the CCTU convened a meeting of the union executive in July 1994, which decided to reinstate Sombes and sack Etame Ndedi instead. A few months later, in September 1994, security forces raided the union headquarters in Yaoundé and forcibly removed Sombes from office, throwing him into prison<sup>44</sup>.

Realising that not even the arrest of Sombes could prevent the CCTU from asserting its autonomy, the regime decided to sponsor a rival trade union centre. In a confidential letter to the Head of State, the Minister of Territorial Administration wrote: «I think the birth of this new trade union organisation will help counteract the activities of the leaders of the CCTU who, in the majority, are members of the radical opposition<sup>45</sup>». Shortly afterwards, the regime allowed the convening of the inaugural meeting of the new trade union centre, the Union of Free Trade Unions of Cameroon (UFTUC). All the available evidence suggests that the UFTUC was to serve as an instrument for the continuing incorporation of trade unionism into the state. According to Salome Tsogo who was elected First Vice-President of the UFTUC, «the success of the UFTUC will constitute a major victory for the CPDM<sup>46</sup>». Having obtained a large degree of autonomy, the CCTU vote that «no matter what others may say about us, we will work with all the other progressive forces to ensure that democracy at least finds fertile ground in the country<sup>47</sup>».

44. *Ibid.*, p. 78; and Eboussi Boulaga, F., 1997, pp. 347-348.

45. Quoted in *The Diasporan*, n° 1, 14 April 1995, p. 5.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*



## Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that one has to be extremely careful in making any pessimistic or optimistic generalisations about the role of trade unions in Africa during the democratisation process. Our three case-studies suggest a large variation in the unions' role, depending not only on such factors as the unions' organisational strength and previous state-union relations, but also on the widespread reluctance of African unions, particularly in the English-speaking countries, to engage in the creation of formal democracy, notably in the form of a multi-party system. On the basis of their experience with both colonial and post-colonial trade union models, African unions have often been inclined to stay aloof from struggles to introduce formal democracy, out of fear that any alliance with opposition movements or parties would eventually turn out to be harmful to their representation of workers' interests. They have therefore preferred to fight for autonomy versus the state and for a larger say in the national decision-making process, which they consider to be essential preconditions for an improvement in their defence of workers' interests and for the development of a democratic culture in society.

Our case-studies have shown that Zambia was the only country where trade unions became a leading force in the struggle for multi-partyism. Significantly, this occurred only after the Kaunda regime had denied the unions autonomy and access to the national decision-making process. Strikingly, the Zambian unions appear to have considered their direct involvement in the creation of formal democracy merely as a temporary arrangement. They wanted to return to their «traditional» role of defending workers' interests after the achievement of this objective. The Ghanaian trade unions simply refused to support or join the opposition after they had compelled the Rawlings regime to allow them participation in the national decision-making process from an autonomous position. Henceforth, the role of Ghanaian trade unions in the creation of formal democracy has been restricted to making some periodic statements on the need for constitutional rule and a larger measure of political liberalisation. Unlike their Zambian and Ghanaian counterparts, Cameroonian unions made no contribution whatever to the introduction of multi-partyism. This was mainly due to the continuing close fusion between the state and civil society in Cameroon. It was only after the introduction of multi-partyism that Cameroonian unions started fighting for autonomy.

Our case-studies also provide evidence that the union struggle for autonomy and a larger say in the national decision-making process as well as for a democratic culture in society has not come to an end with the coming into being of multi-party democracy in Africa. The new «democratic» governments have continued to intervene in union affairs for the purpose of political control and to deny, or restrict, union access to the decision-making process. To consolidate their achievements and to make new inroads along

the path to democracy, the unions should pay particular attention to the following tasks :

- *strengthening their organisation.* African unions have been weakened by the implementation of SAPs, leading to a considerable loss of membership. This should encourage the unions even more than before to enlarge their social base and to go beyond their traditional constituency by mobilising and organising workers in the informal and rural sectors. Moreover, unlike the Zambian unions which have severed their ties with other social forces in society since multi-partyism, African trade unions should instead attempt to enhance their position of power by seeking alliances with other civil society organisations;
- *improving upon their negotiating and bargaining position in national decision-making fora.* African unions used to simply criticise SAPs for their harmful effects on workers' living and working conditions. They would be taken more seriously in bilateral and tripartite organs if they came up with alternative proposals aimed at an improvement in both the economic situation and workers' living and working conditions. This could be done in close co-operation with universities and research institutes;
- *democratising their internal organisation and administration.* The move towards a more democratic governance in the wider society should also have an impact on the internal administration of the trade unions themselves. The introduction of regular, secret and free elections at all levels and of internal structures providing for accountability and the active participation of members in the governing of trade unions would be a major source of strength. Particular provision should be made for the inclusion of the youth and women in the decision-making process.

African unions appear to be in a process of rapid change. In a recent publication, Kester and Sidibé show that many African unions are already taking a number of measures to implement our recommendations<sup>48</sup>. This is encouraging !

48. Kester, G., and Sidibé, O.O., 1997.